# Challenges of Military Readiness

**Senator James M. Inhofe**

UPHOLDING MILITARY READINESS in a time of relative peace and prosperity presents enormous challenges to politicians and policy makers. Despite public apathy and occasional resistance, they must make tough decisions that will affect our national security for years to come. It is a difficult task that many of us in Congress and the executive branch are grappling with at the current time.

Popular conventional wisdom holds that we are now reaping the fruits of a remarkable postwar era—in the aftermath of both the Gulf War and Cold War. America now stands as the world's lone superpower. We are told it is a time when the threats we have lived with for a generation have receded to the ash heap of history. As such, there are strong tendencies to relax, draw down our forces, let down our guard and put off the costly expenses of military upkeep, refurbishment and modernization.

Yet a more realistic view of the world would suggest that we are just as likely to be in the calm prewar era, a time before the next serious challenge to America's vital interests requiring a major military response. History teaches that we are often surprised by hostile international developments, such as Pearl Harbor, the invasion of South Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Iran hostage crisis or the invasion of Kuwait. These remind us of the need to stay prepared. It is a lesson we may think we have learned until we are surprised once again and caught with our military ill prepared to meet the unforeseen crisis of the moment.

***For the past six years, we have been leaving the wrong kind of legacy. We have cut budgetary spending power, depleted our supplies of ammunition and spare parts and allowed training, equipment and property to degrade and personnel to leave the services in droves. We have put off tough decisions about replacing key weapon systems, equipment and infrastructure. We have dangerously presumed we have the luxury of adequate time to reverse course if we would ever see real storm clouds on the horizon.***

Many fear this is where we are today. While the public is complacent, the US military is suffering readiness, modernization and budget shortfalls which are seriously degrading its ability to meet the national military strategy—to be prepared to fight and win two major theater wars nearly simultaneously. At the same time, our smaller forces are being stretched thin by an unprecedented

proliferation of noncombat contingency operations and missions.

The administration boasts how the US military is "doing more with less." But if a real war should break out unexpectedly, or if current trends are not reversed soon, we may be unpleasantly surprised to find out that our military can only "do less with less."

***Part of the problem is lack of adequate resources. Overall defense spending has declined in real terms for 14 straight years. Vital increases in procurement and modernization spending have been promised and postponed so many times that any new promises seem empty. Strict budgetary spending caps constrain defense spending much more severely than domestic spending, which continues to increase.***

As the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness & Management Support chairman, I am determined to provide our military with more of what it needs to meet any challenge to the nation's security and well being. In approaching this responsibility, I am also mindful of the reality that it will take years to restore and modernize the US Armed Forces in the ways necessary to be fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. It took years to build the military that was ready and able to win the Gulf War. Similarly, the decisions we make today about investing in our defense needs will directly affect what future commanders will have at their disposal when facing some unforeseen future crisis.

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I am convinced we do not have such a luxury. The storm clouds are already there, if we will only see them. New and dangerous threats are emerging throughout the world. At the same time, our ability to meet them has been diminished by complacency, shortsightedness and neglect. The time to begin to reverse course is now.

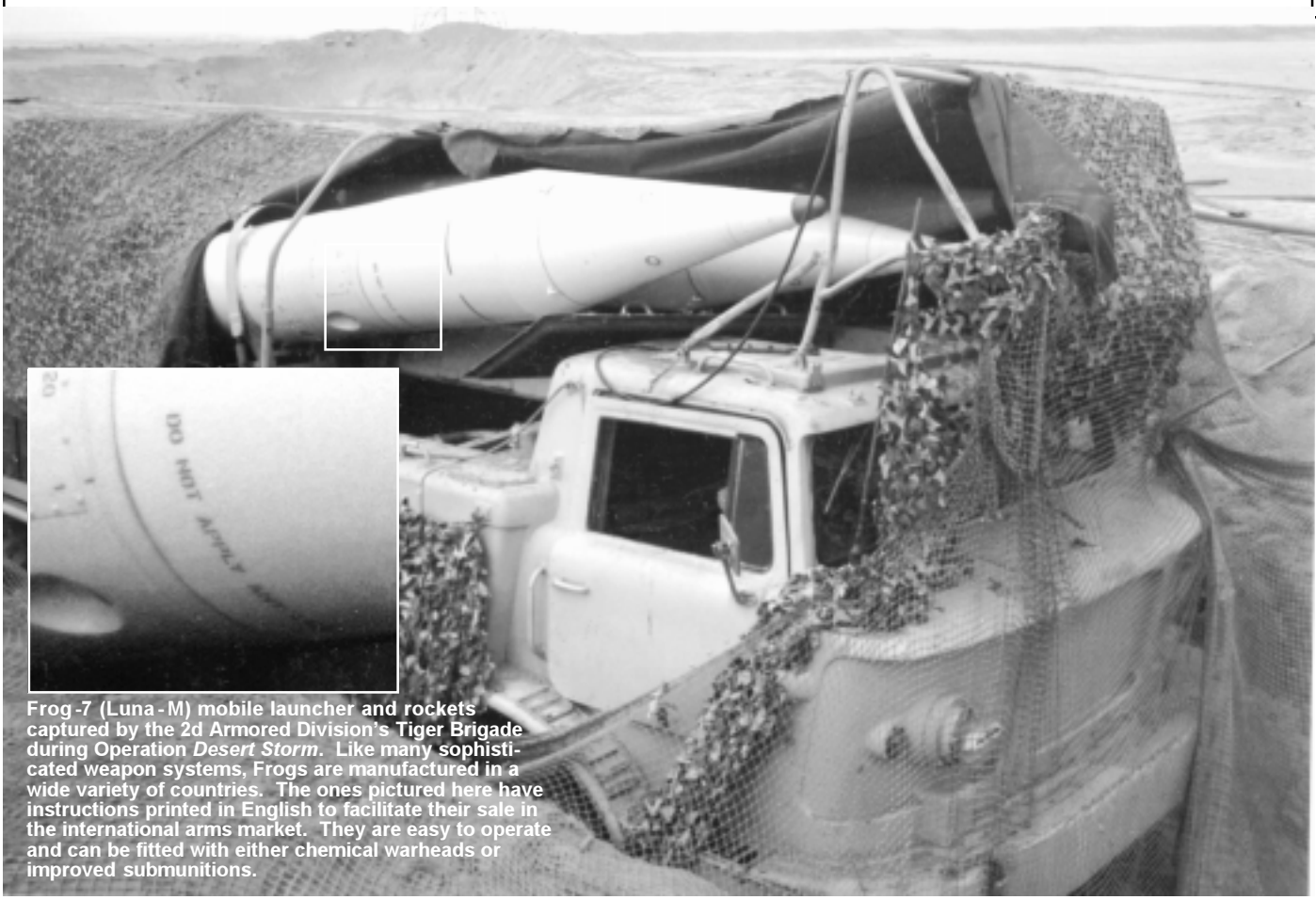
Overseas contingency operations, such as our unlimited peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and our unending build-up/build-down containment of Iraq, are having a much more significant impact on military readiness than is generally realized.

In 1995, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified before a skeptical Congress that he supported the commitment of US troops to Bosnia only on the condition that it be a limited one-year operation costing less than $1.2 billion. He indicated anything beyond that would cause an unacceptable drain on US military readiness due to the tight budgets facing the Pentagon for the foreseeable future. On that basis—with that time and cost limit—Congress went along by a margin of only a few votes. But now, more than three years later, as some of us predicted, the Bosnia mission has become unlimited, direct costs have already surpassed $12 billion and the drain on readiness is a reality that only grows as we contemplate a similar ill-conceived peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.

During my initial visits to US forces in Bosnia, I got a taste of what was happening behind the scenes. Many US ground troops being deployed to Bosnia came from the 21st Theater Army Area Command based in Germany. This command alone had been reduced in size from 28,000 in 1991 to about 7,000 in 1996. The supporting, logistic and resupply functions for this deployment were huge and are representative of what is happening throughout our "overstretched" military. The troops were working longer hours with increased demands, resulting in less time with their families. Ten- and 20-year-old trucks were being used to capacity, many with odometers reading over a million miles. Personnel with specialized skills, such as mechanics, petroleum handlers and electrical technicians, were in especially high demand and often had to be drawn away from US-based units to fill essential billets. The effect on readiness, not just for the troops in Bosnia and those in the Germany-based resupply operation, but for those throughout the ranks in the United States as well, was and is enormous.

Troops in Bosnia are not keeping up with vital battalion-level combat training. Any order to redeploy to a major crisis in Iraq or Korea would require substantial retraining, costing significant time and resources. Equipment cannibalization rates are up because spare parts have been in short supply. Clearly the Bosnia mission has exacerbated serious concerns throughout the military—divorce rates are up, retention rates and morale are down and readiness is suffering.

US Army



Frog-7 (Luna-M) mobile launcher and rockets captured by the 2d Armored Division's Tiger Brigade during Operation *Desert Storm*. Like many sophisticated weapon systems, Frogs are manufactured in a wide variety of countries. The ones pictured here have instructions printed in English to facilitate their sale in the international arms market. They are easy to operate and can be fitted with either chemical warheads or improved submunitions.

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A large part of the problem is lack of adequate resources. Overall defense spending has declined in real terms for 14 straight years. Vital increases in procurement and modernization spending have been promised and postponed so many times already that any new promises seem empty. Strict budgetary spending caps constrain defense spending much more severely than domestic spending, which continues to increase.

To turn things around, our military requires more funds, improved equipment and training, better housing and a myriad of other tangible items. This year the Senate Readiness Subcommittee plans to examine aspects of some of these issues and more. We will be looking for ways to improve readiness and leverage efficiencies to make scarce dollars go farther.

With an ambitious planned schedule of nearly 20 hearings, we will examine such issues as: Year 2000 computer compliance; Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps readiness; military construction; real property maintenance; business management reform; acquisition procedures; the impact of contingency operations; ammunition requirements; military family housing; military training; logistics; and maintenance.

It is gratifying that more and more people are beginning to realize the full extent of the military readiness crisis and what needs to be done about it. In recent weeks, the president, secretary of defense, the joint chiefs of staff and many others have acknowledged that restoring our military must be a high national priority in the immediate years ahead. We in Congress hope to provide constructive oversight and guidance, working with the military to make the improvements all of us know are necessary. This should not be a partisan issue—the stakes are too high.

This year, there is good reason to believe that Congress will pass a long-overdue measure to increase basic military pay and reform military retirement benefits. These were among the priority items mentioned by top US military leaders as necessary to improve morale, recruitment and retention.

There is also strong sentiment in Congress to adequately address one of the most significant threats facing our forces today—their vulnerability to attacks by ballistic missiles. We know that sophisticated technology for both short- and long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction is proliferating around the world. The existing missile threats to our forces now stationed in the Middle East, Korea and elsewhere are real and growing, not to mention the national missile threat to our homeland.

***Similarly, space control is important to all of our services in meeting their mission. We must recognize that space is the ultimate "high ground" of any future conflict. Our forces are increasingly dependent on it for reconnaissance, communications, targeting, information and data of all kinds. I believe that protecting future readiness requires us to be constantly vigilant of our need to dominate the space environment.***

Robust theater missile defenses, such as the Army's Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and the Navy's Aegis Theater Wide (NTW) system, must be given especially high priority for development, testing and deployment. As we proceed, we must understand that there will be both successes and setbacks as the technology matures. We must not be overly discouraged by testing failures. We must learn from them and move forward. This is surely among the lessons we have gleaned from the remarkable development of rocket and computer technology in our lifetimes.

National missile defense is also an urgent priority. I am an advocate of upgrading the NTW system—building upon our almost $50 billion investment in Aegis ships, radars, launching platforms and air defense systems—to make it capable of playing a vitally needed and affordable national missile defense role.

At the same time, I believe it is imperative that we not constrain or "dumb down" our defensive technology for the vague promises of "paper" arms control agreements. American ingenuity and missile defense technology should not be looked upon as diplomatic bargaining chips. Once again, the stakes are too high.

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But with all of this, there is something else, something more. As I travel to US military bases around our country and overseas, I recognize that our most vital military asset is our people—the troops, the enlisted men and women and the noncommissioned officers and officers who are devoting their lives to serving their country.

When I talk to them about their jobs and their concerns, I am often struck by their remarkable capacity to adapt to any material hardship presented by the current readiness crisis as it relates to deficiencies in equipment, weapon systems and spare parts, not to mention long hours, difficult deployments and inadequate pay. They are trained and willing to do their best to overcome such obstacles.

What I find they miss, more than anything else in today's environment, is that confident sense of mission that comes from knowing what America's role in the world is and knowing the public understands and supports that role. They want and expect to have intuitive confidence that the military they serve in is always being used prudently and wisely to advance vital national interests.

This, more than anything else, is what is truly lacking today and it is hurting military morale, retention and readiness. For our civilian leaders of the US Armed Forces, from the president to Congress to the American people, this is the biggest challenge we face—and the one we must not fail to address and rectify as quickly as possible. ***MR***

*Senator James M. Inhofe was elected in 1994 to represent the state of Oklahoma in the US Senate following four terms in the US House of Representatives. As chairman of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, he assists in overseeing aspects of defense operations including military construction, depot maintenance, training, logistics and ammunition procurement. He also serves on the Strategic Forces and AirLand subcommittees and the Intelligence Committee. He received a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Tulsa. He served in the US Army from 1954 to 1956.*